



MEDICARE NEWS

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MEDICARE TOLL-FREE LINE COMMEMORATES FIRST ANNIVERSARY More Than 1 Million Calls Received at 1-800-MEDICARE

In just 12 months, more than 1.5 million callers – Medicare beneficiaries and the people who help them with their health care decisions – have used America's new telephone number for Medicare information, ***1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)***.

Established by the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) in 1999, the Medicare Choices Helpline is available throughout the United States and is the only national toll-free phone line that provides up-to-date information about Medicare.

"Callers to 1-800-MEDICARE tell us this service really helps them get answers to their questions about Medicare," said HCFA Administrator Nancy-Ann DeParle. "They like the information they are getting, and they like having a wide range of options on how to get that information."

"Beneficiaries who have called 1-800-MEDICARE have told us they like talking to a person who can answer their questions," said DeParle. "They also want to be reassured that if they are happy with how they currently get their health care, they don't have to make any changes at all."

HCFA phased in the toll-free telephone line across the country between January and March 1999, and was fully operational throughout the country on April 1, six months ahead of schedule. Today 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) averages about 75,000 calls each week. Most callers request information about the availability of managed care plans in their community, followed by requests for Medicare publications.

Callers to ***1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)*** can talk to a customer service representative in English or Spanish between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. local time, Monday through Friday to get:

- general information about Medicare;
- general information about Medicare health plan options in their community, including original fee-for service Medicare and, where available, managed care;
- specific quality and satisfaction information about available managed care plans;
- general information about Medicare supplemental insurance (Medigap); and
- telephone numbers for help with a variety of related issues, such as billing questions about Medicare claims or for help with more complex questions about health insurance.

- More -

Callers with access to a teletypewriter (TTY) or telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD), can call 1-877-486-2048.

“1-800-MEDICARE is just one place where Medicare beneficiaries can get information about their Medicare,” said Carol Cronin, Director of HCFA’s Center for Beneficiary Services. “In addition to the Helpline, beneficiaries can get information from the *Medicare & You* handbook, from www.medicare.gov or from the hundreds of local and national organizations who work with Medicare beneficiaries.”

HCFA created the national Medicare & You information program to provide information resources to help Medicare beneficiaries better understand Medicare. Medicare & You includes expanded and updated print materials such as the *Medicare & You* handbook and other topic-specific publications, the toll-free telephone line, and the beneficiary-oriented Internet Web site – www.medicare.gov -- as well as a coordinated partnership program with more than 200 national and local organizations who work with Medicare beneficiaries and their caregivers. The program also includes an extensive evaluation component designed to help HCFA learn from beneficiaries and the people who help them with their health care decisions about how they want to receive information about Medicare.

The Medicare consumer website, unveiled in June 1998, had more than 1.3 million page views in February 2000 and its usage continues to grow. The most-visited sections are Medicare Compare and Nursing Home Compare. Medicare Compare has up-to-date comparative information about Medicare managed care plans that are available across the country. Nursing Home Compare includes information about individual nursing homes. New features at www.medicare.gov include Medigap Compare and an outreach calendar that lists more than 3,000 health fairs, meetings and presentations that are being held all across the nation. Medicare publications can also be downloaded from the web site.

Medicare is the nation's largest health insurance program and covers almost 40 million Americans over 65 and certain people with disabilities in original fee-for-service Medicare and the Medicare+Choice program. In fiscal year 1999, HCFA spent an estimated \$288 billion to finance health care services to elderly and disabled Americans in the Medicare and Medicaid programs.

“Nearly 40 million Americans depend on Medicare for the health care they deserve,” DeParle said. “They should have as many choices as possible -- in their care and the information they receive about Medicare.”

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